

THE SURVEY

GRAPHIC NUMBER

April 29,
1922



Volume XLVIII
No. 5



NO GLASS TOPPED DESKS HERE

Nor wing collars—nor Renaissance directors' room. The board of directors of Martin Himler's mine are miners who meet in their shirt sleeves and own shares in this unique cooperative mining venture

Himler of Himlerville

By EUGENE S. BAGGER



O movie scenario writer could have invented a more dramatic contrast than that afforded by the two banks of the Tug River.

Martin County is the easternmost salient of Kentucky. Local chroniclers relate how in the early days of steamship navigation on the Ohio, barges used to make a stop on the Kentucky bank of the Tug, opposite Kermit, West Virginia; how the mate and a gang of deck hands would go on shore with a pick and shovel and dig up, out of an exposed seam of coal, a supply to last the trip down the Ohio. Yet for half a century the inhabitants of Martin County were living poor amid all this plenty. The railroad engineers avoided the hills of Martin County as if by conspiracy; the county, with all the riches dormant in its soil, remained closed to the outside world.

Today all this is changed. Thousands of acres of coal and timber land, lying fallow for half a century, are being opened up, thanks to Martin

Himler, Hungarian immigrant, newspaper editor and mining promoter.

Mingo County, on the West Virginia side, has been the scene of one of the bitterest episodes in American class warfare, the battlefield of armed miners and the detectives and gunmen of operators. In Martin County, on the Kentucky side, a small group of foreigners have found their own solution of the problem of capital vs. labor in what is perhaps the only cooperative coal mine in the United States.

Sixteen years ago Himler, a young Hungarian boy fresh from school, landed in the port of New York with exactly nineteen cents in his pocket. He was eighteen years old and had originally studied to become a grade school teacher; but he changed his mind and came to America, the land of his dreams. He had no special training that he could utilize in the new country; he did not even speak a word of English. After beating around in New York for a while he did what the pluckier of his kind usually do: he went to West Virginia and got

a job as a coal miner at Thacker. There and at other places he stayed for about two years; then he returned to New York and for six years extracted a living from odd jobs. He worked in a shoe factory, he was a dishwasher, a messenger, what not. At last he landed as a clerk in a Hungarian-American business concern; there he spent a year, at the end of which he went into business for himself. With the magnificent capital of eight dollars he inaugurated, on the lower East Side, a Hungarian weekly newspaper called *Magyar Bányászlap* (Hungarian Miners' Journal).

For Himler had not forgotten the time he had spent in the coal mines. When he named his little newspaper the Miners' Journal other Hungarian publications scoffed at him, called him a parlor miner and asked what the Hungarian miners needed a special newspaper for anyway. But Himler had his own ideas and kept them to himself—for the time being.

There are approximately one million Hungarians in the United States, and about thirty thousand of them are said to be engaged in the coal mining industry. Most of them are located in the West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Ohio coal fields.

The miner-editor had acquired a first hand knowledge of the problems and needs of his fellow countrymen in America. He saw them doubly uprooted—in coming from Hungary to America, and in turning, for livelihood, from agriculture to an industry. He saw their restlessness, their craving for independence—the craving that had urged them on to the New World, only to find them in new shackles. He began to realize, dimly at first, that the only solution of those problems would be one that could unite the habituations acquired in the new surroundings with those imported from the old; one that would be based on the land-owning, home-making instinct of the peasant.

These things were growing upon his mind when he set going his Miners' Journal on the lower East Side of New York. To say simply that he was publishing it is an understatement. For he was publisher, editor, reporter, bookkeeper, advertising agent all in one. But the business expanded; the paper began to gain circulation among the miners in Pennsylvania and West Virginia. When his readers came to New York they looked him up. His modest office gradually developed into a sort of labor exchange and social center combined. All the while the other Hungarian newspapers either ignored or ridiculed him. Life within an immigrant community has an element of

harshness which is the fruit of isolation; of people living too near one another, inquiring too much and knowing too much; it is, also, a fruit of the frustrated desire for expansion and self expression. Disillusionment is the *Leitmotiv*; for the successful immigrant, in most cases, leaves the colony and becomes American; only the failures remain. But Himler kept on; nothing could swerve him from the straight line of his plans.

Now the Hungarians, like the Poles, are an eminently romantic and easy-going people. Individually the Hungarian peasant is shrewd, industrious and thrifty; he is as good as any. But he is, or was until recently, slow to collective action. Corporate life with him is merely an opportunity for oratory and personal politics. In America he has so far achieved nothing to vie with the compact and elaborate organization of the Finns or Japanese or Czechs; nothing, in fact, apart from a few fraternal societies, doing insurance business honestly enough but with antiquated methods. From time to time there is an attempt to "do something" in the way of organization; it usually fizzles out in after-dinner speeches and newspaper polemics.

Himler saw these odds against him but he did not give in. He acquired a reputation for honesty and a genuine interest in the everyday affairs of the working man; and he built up a following.

About four years ago he finally sprang his plan on the Hungarian-American community. He announced, through his paper, the formation of a co-operative mining company, and offered stock for sale. The idea was unique: a mining corporation where the workers would be stockholders and the stockholders workers, where the profits would

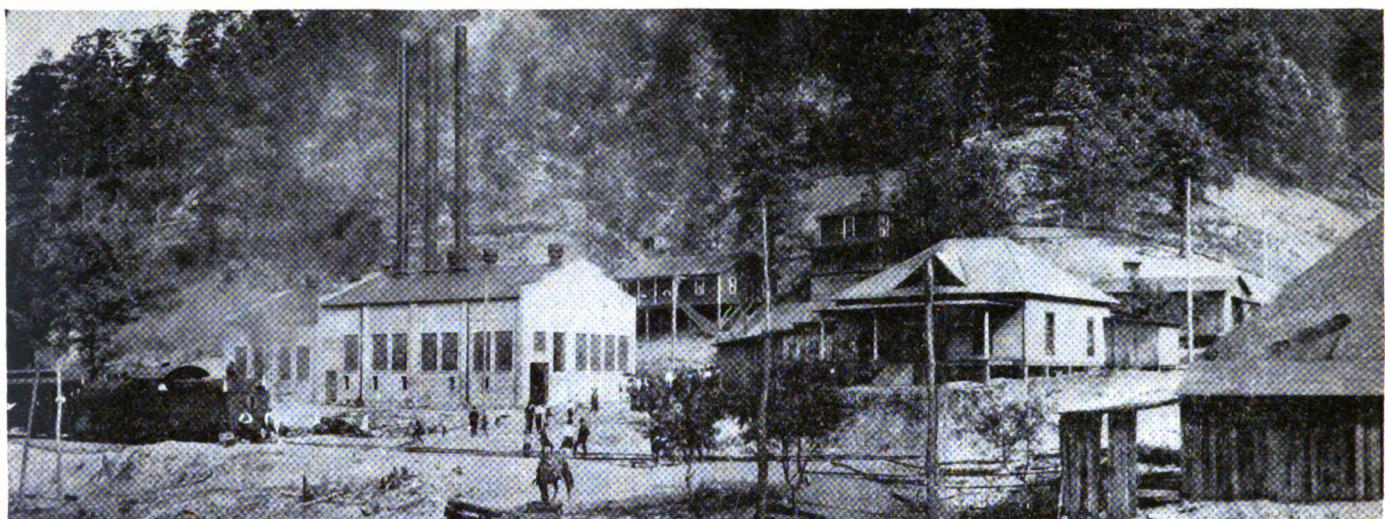
be issued as dividends to the miners themselves. The chief difficulty he had to contend with, however, was not the newness of his idea, but its age. Selling stock to the immigrants through newspaper advertising is an ancient and dishonorable game. Honest promoters are ruined by the distrust that grows up in the wake of swindlers. But Himler was aided by his reputation. He organized a fifty thousand dollar corporation and went down to West Virginia with a group of stockholders. There they bought a little mine near Ajax on the Norfolk and Western Railroad, and tested the cooperative principle for the first time. The principle was found good enough, but not the property. So they sold it and crossed the Tug River into Kentucky.

Himler's following grew now to the impressive number



MARTIN HIMLER

A Hungarian immigrant who is now a newspaper editor and a mine promoter



Panoramic view of the Himler Coal Company at Himlerville, Kentucky. Power house, offices,

of 1,400. The capital was increased to \$500,000; and the Himler Coal Company, incorporated under the laws of West Virginia, leased a property of 3,000 acres near Warfield, in Martin County, opposite Kermit, West Virginia, which was the railroad terminal.

There was plenty of coal on the property; nevertheless the investment looked, in the beginning, very much like a white elephant. The Hungarian pioneers had to do everything from the bottom up. They had to install machinery, bore the shaft and construct the slope; they had to build houses for themselves, to put in a water system. And the nearest railroad station, Kermit, was two miles away. Not very far, by Interborough Rapid Transit standards. But in those two miles between Kermit and Himlerville, as the Hungarians called their new settlement, lay the unbridged Tug River, and a long stretch of Kentucky mud. Pieces of machinery weighing between ten and twenty tons had to be carried across the river on floats, and dragged by horses across the trackless mire. Thousands of tons of concrete had to be hauled in the same way. In early spring, with ice drifting down the river, and the roads, such as they were, transformed into a muddy sea by the melting snow, it took six weeks for an exceptionally heavy piece to cover that distance of two miles.

The colonists saw that their problem was above everything else one of communications; that their investment was worthless unless Martin County was connected with the outside world. What was needed was a steel and concrete bridge across the Tug River, which would secure an extension of the Norfolk and Western Railroad into Martin County.

It was estimated that the bridge would cost \$150,000 and could be completed within ten months. Coal land owners of Martin County underwrote most of the amount; the Hungarian cooperatives subscribed \$20,000. Four months passed. The mine of the Himler Company was opened in the meantime. Then the engineers discovered a bed of quicksand eighteen feet below the bottom of the river. Only by boring to a depth of from thirty to forty feet could they reach the rock. Estimates rose to \$200,000; the cooperatives accordingly

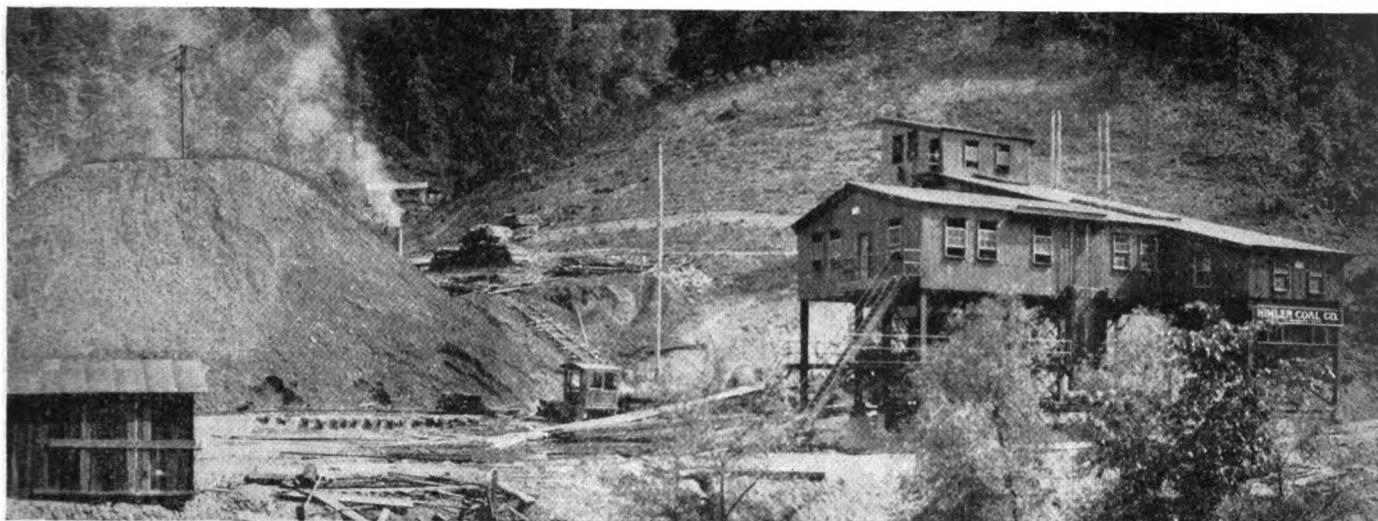
raised their subscription to \$45,000. Further physical difficulties developed. The majority stockholders of the Kermit-Warfield Bridge Company, the corporation organized by the coal land owners, declared they could not increase their contribution, and asked Himler to advance cash. Himler met the contingency by borrowing \$125,000 on twelve-year bonds mortgaged on the bridge. But it soon appeared that another \$100,000 was needed, and the majority stockholders wanted Himler to raise it. Himler now saw that they meant to use the cooperatives as a cat's paw, and declared that he would not put up another penny unless he was given full control of the bridge. The majority stockholders refused, knowing well that control of the bridge meant control of the 40,000 acres of Martin County coal and timber lands. Himler stood his ground. Work on the bridge stopped. The land owners surrendered. Himler bought their interest outright, and resumed construction. The cooperatives now were absolute owners of the key to the future of the whole region.

It took \$300,000 and twenty-two months to complete the bridge, instead of the \$150,000 and ten months of the original estimates. Every penny of the amount represented the investment of the Hungarian cooperatives. But completed it was just a year ago.

May 21, 1921, was a great day in the history of Martin County. Under an eight-column front page streamer reading Vast Coal and Timber Land Opened, the Huntington (West Virginia) Herald-Dispatch described the event with typical American dash:

"The gates of Martin County, Kentucky, locked for countless ages, were thrown wide today, when a train of two coaches, gaily bedecked and crowded with men, women and children in holiday dress entered. The special train with Daniel Elmer Hewitt, Huntington lumber baron, at the throttle, and Martin Himler wielding the fireman's shovel, made history for eastern Kentucky. It was the first standard gauge train to roll upon Martin County soil.

"Thousands of acres of untouched coal and



living quarters, mine dump and tipple—in the ownership of which the miners in the pit share

timber lands lie within the gates which were unlocked for the first time today, awaiting the magic touch of capital harnessed to industry. . . . Behind the remarkable development of the huge project involving construction of a great steel bridge and a railroad by private capital, lies a notable story of individual vision. . . . A guiding genius in the tremendous enterprise is Martin Himler, a native of Hungary, but long a naturalized American citizen, who has organized the first workable cooperative coal mining company in America, if not in the world. . . . The announcement made by Himler that the bridge would never be used for selfish purposes, but, together with the railroad, would be devoted to the public use for the development of the tremendous resources of Martin County, was held the most important development of the day's celebration. . . .

"Today's celebration was unique in many particulars. The two-car train, decked with garlands and flags and laden with holiday crowds, leaves the little settlement of Kermit (on the West Virginia side) amid cheers of such multitudes as are able to gather on the slopes. . . . A great bridge is approached. It is THE bridge, the only bridge in the world as far as Kermit and Martin County folk care. . . . It is the gateway of the hopes of thousands of people. . . .

"The train enters the famous village of Warfield, Kentucky, and runs on to Himlerville. The engine whistle shrieks, and the sirens of the great power house wail a welcome. There are cheers and happy smiles. The train halts, and the crowds pile off. Frank Demjén, Hungarian, plays Old Kentucky Home on a cornet, solus. It is the big moment. . . ."

The "great power house" marked an achievement very similar in its evolution to that of the bridge itself. While the difficulties of bridge construction were at their height, Himler opened negotiations with the local power company for a supply of electricity. The company is controlled by resident coal operators of the district and they were naturally not over-anxious to help out their new competitor. Still terms were proffered. The company demanded from Himler an advance of \$60,000 to improve its

equipment. Himler agreed to pay it, but stipulated that the contract had to be filled within a certain length of time. Weeks passed, and he was informed that arrangements could not be completed by the date set. Himler at once broke off negotiations and proceeded to erect his own power plant. He had no cash—the bridge absorbed every penny. An associate suggested the construction of a small power house at a cost of \$20,000.

"I am not building for the present, but for the future," was his characteristic answer. A small plant would become inadequate within two or three years. Money was dug up and a power plant, with every piece of machinery in duplicate for emergencies, was erected at an expense of \$150,000.

Up to last July the capital of the concern represented 5,000 shares of \$100 each, held by 1,500 individual stockholders. Himler himself holds but 2 or 3 per cent of the shares; the rest is held by miners in such small lots that no less than 450 individual holders of the largest lots are necessary to form a majority of 51 per cent. A board of eleven directors is elected by the yearly convention. With the exception of Himler, president, general manager and mine superintendent, and Eugene Lang, a young Hungarian business man working for a salary, who is secretary and treasurer, the directors are all common miners. The net receipts are divided in three equal parts. One part is issued as a dividend on the 5,000 shares. The second part is paid out as a bonus to the miners who are actually employed at Himlerville. At present they number 120—mostly stockholders, naturally, and from five to ten newcomers are added weekly from a long waiting list of stockholders. The bonus is issued in equal portions regardless of the number of shares held by individuals. The third part is joined to the reserve capital.

When the convention of the cooperatives met last July at Himlerville, and Himler rendered account of his stewardship, the 600 delegates representing 2,975 votes unanimously raised the capital of \$500,000 to \$2,000,000, and decided on the opening of two new mines, in addition to the one already in operation.

HIMLER OF HIMLERVILLE

In addition to the 3,000 acres originally leased, options are held by the cooperatives on 7,000 acres of coal land owned by the Berger estate, Cincinnati, and about 5,000 acres held by various small owners. There is room, moreover, for further development in the direction of 27,000 acres owned by the Kentucky Byproduct Coal Company and other vast tracts near by.

The coal at the original mine is five feet high and of excellent quality. The roof is exceptionally firm, rendering unnecessary the dangerous and expensive posting. The equipment of the mine is strictly up to date. There is a tipple, with a daily capacity of 3,000 tons, built of steel at a cost of \$100,000. It sorts the coal through three screens into different sizes. The dump is constructed so that the cars can be turned without being uncoupled. The shaft, or perpendicular entrance to the mine, is 76 feet deep and lined with concrete. The slope, carved in solid rock to a depth of 60 feet at an angle of 45 degrees, has room for an elevator, a supply track and a stairway. Before the slope was completed 10,000 tons of coal were brought to the surface through the airshaft, to be burnt at the power plant or sold for local consumption. There are Goodman "short wall" machines of the newest type to cut the coal; like all other machinery they are operated by electricity, and high power electric drills are installed. A large number of cars, of a capacity of two tons each, conveys the coal to the tipple.

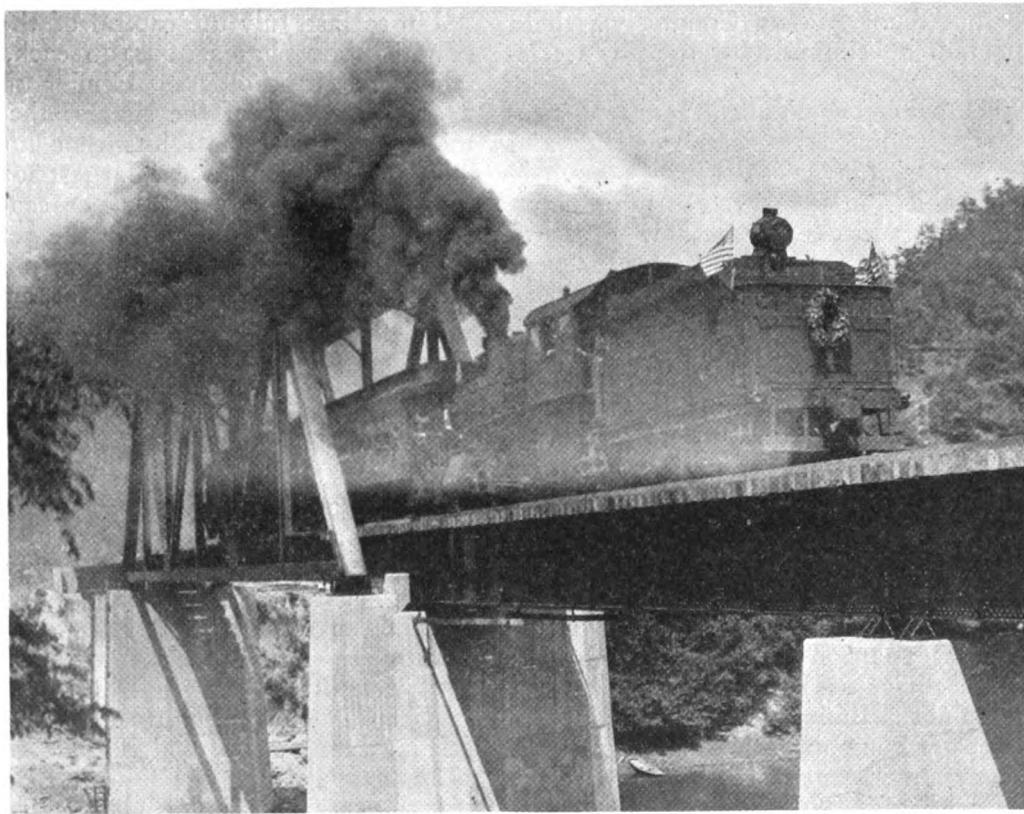
Himlerville is a planned community. Some of the miners with families will own their homes; others lease the company houses; single ones live at a reg-

ular bachelor hotel. The cottages contain two rooms of $13\frac{1}{4}$ by 15 feet each and two of $11\frac{1}{2}$ by 15 feet each, all rooms having two windows each; kitchens and bath room with tub and shower and hot water supply; plastered floors; heating by gas and electricity as well as two open fireplaces for coal and wood; front and back porch. Everything is of fireproof material.

Each house has a little flower garden in front, vegetable patch and accommodation in the rear for cows, pigs and poultry. Beside these standardized houses men may build their own homes according to taste; but it is noteworthy that the old frame dwellings purchased from natives are always supplanted by more ambitious and hygienic structures. There is a headquarters building, housing the offices of the company in the upper story and a general store in the lower. The latter sells everything from chewing tobacco to millinery and magazines. It has its own refrigerating plant and a rest room for women. The cooperative, however, permits the operation of individual stores for profit.

The evils, moral and hygienic, of the boarding house system are countered by the erection of a bachelor's hotel, equipped with baths. There is a two-story club house, containing a library with the best of classic and modern English and Hungarian literature and scientific reference works; an auditorium, seating eight hundred, for amateur theatricals (in which Hungarians excel) and movies. In addition there is a billiard room and a meeting hall, which also serves as ball room. There is a great

(Continued on page 187)



A DREAM COME TRUE

Against unbelievable odds Martin Himler bridged the Tug River from West Virginia into Kentucky and made possible Himlerville and the Himler mine

HIMLER OF HIMLERVILLE

(Continued from page 150)

school with a nine-month term (the county pays the teacher's salary for six months, the company supplements it for three) and the opening of a high school is planned for this fall.

A remarkable feature in these days of quasi prohibition is the rigor with which alcoholic drinks are banned from the settlement. Only a few months ago Himler discovered that one of the most prominent members of the settlement, who, pending completion of the bachelors' hotel, kept a boarding house for the men, was selling moonshine liquor by the glass. Himler summoned the man to his office and gave him forty-eight hours to sell his property and quit the colony under the alternative of being turned over to state authorities. The evening of the second day found the man on the other side of the state line. His absence was inquired about at a directors' meeting. "I kicked him out. He was selling liquor to my miners," was the curt explanation given by Himler. It was sufficient.

Martin Himler knows his Hungarian miners—and after all there is not much difference in this respect between the Hungarians and those of other nationalities. He is aware what a powerful factor the home-making, homestead-owning instinct is in the European peasant. Instead of thwarting that instinct, and thereby increasing the factors that make for unrest, he chooses to convert it into a stabilizing asset. He says in an article on the housing facilities at Himlerville, published in his weekly newspaper *Képes Világlap* (Illustrated World News; acquired not long ago as a twin enterprise to the Miners' Journal):

Many of the miners at Himlerville have grown so fond of the settlement that they decided to make their permanent home there. Rather an exceptional thing with miners, too. For miners are wont to roam from one place to the other—dissatisfied with work or treatment, or simply in quest for a better life. The majority of the miners at Himlerville do not want to roam any longer. They found the soil upon which it is worth while to build their homes for good. They bought lots at Himlerville and built their houses upon them. Both lot and house are owned by the miners. Everything is done to suit their own taste; so that the Hungarian in America has at last lived to dwell in his own home and to water flowers in his own garden.

The principal value of the Himlerville experiment, then, as far as Americanization is concerned, is in the organized attempt to bind the immigrant to the country by giving him a stake in the land, by affording an outlet to his instinct for ownership and home-building, by contriving a compromise between his old and his new mode of life and by giving him a new sense of independence and importance. It may be added, to reassure those who believe in the conventional type of Americanization, that only men in possession of their first papers are eligible for holding stock in the Himler Coal Company—a logical enough stipulation, as only permanent settlers are desired. An evening class in English and civics for adults is conducted in the school building by the secretary of the company.

Will the experiment of the Martin County cooperative pioneers succeed? The answer depends on the standards by which success is measured. Martin Himler does not offer the workers a get-rich-quick scheme. He warns them in advance that there is hard work, a fight against odds. The first cooperative coal mine in America is frankly an experiment. But its significance cannot be expressed in tons of coal mined, nor in wages paid. What Himler tries to do is to make men, not owners of wealth, but masters of their own destiny. The significance of the Himlerville venture is moral as well as economic.

(In answering this advertisement please mention THE SURVEY. It helps us, it identifies you.)

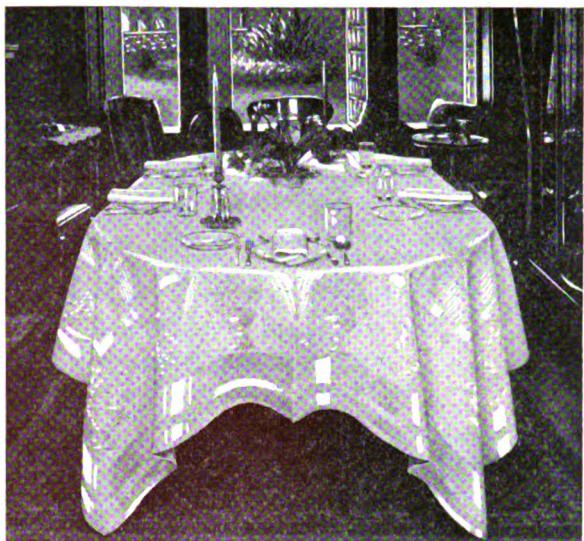


Illustration shows the "Fine Stripe and Vase Border" pattern in service

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